

# The Author as the Psychological, Intellectual, and Moral Unity in the Slovenian Novel of the Last Third of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

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*In the Slovene novel of the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the majority of literary protagonists deal with a question of relationships between an individual and society. Literary work hence puts up a moral and ethical mirror to the current society. In images of authors in various Slovene novels it is possible to reveal reflections of mentality of a novelist as a spokesman of national aspirations and the indicator of a condition of modern society and culture. The factor of "author's will" in itself is indissolubly connected with the act of creation of a literary work. The artistic image always depends on a subjectivity of its own creator. In each literary work the author solves many important moral, historical and philosophical questions both for itself and the society. Thus, in private stories and personal problems a modern novel allows us to understand the general development of the society and culture of Slovenia on a way to democratic transformations at the end of the 1980's and during the strengthening of the new state in the 1990's.*

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In order to find an answer to the question of who or what writes the literature, it is probably first of all well to identify one of the many possible meanings of the word "literature". The meaning of the word is crucial. I have in mind not literature as the totality of written works and utterances that have appeared in the course of cultural development, nor, of course, special literatures, which have become an integral part of progress. Rather, I mean so-called belles-lettres, even though today it is difficult to

speak about beauty as a distinguishing feature of contemporary literature, which often tries to locate itself between chaos and negation. While giving research into literacy and the text its due, I would like to emphasize the priority of a literary work as a deliberate imaginative, aesthetic unity. After all, if we overly emphasize a functional, formalistic approach to literary material, we run the risk of reducing the author's role to a batch of writing techniques or a method, like rules for drawing up legal documents or semi-automated formulae for writing romance novels. Indeed, in the case of such types of literature we can speak about the verifiable death of the author. Such texts, composed by someone in the past, have forever lost their internal – spiritual, if you will – bond with the source that generated them, and while they function independently, they are not alive. In this way they become devoid of the uniqueness characteristic of a masterpiece that is able to fascinate very different people around the world. Both external preconditions and internal features of the author's self or individuality merge to form the integrated entity that is a work of literary art.

The shaping of a literary work into a complex of separate, quite independent elements, and its organization as a finished whole is possible only in the presence of a certain binding substance that can only be a human. Mikhail Bakhtin especially emphasized this point in the early 1920s, in particular in *The Author and Hero in Aesthetic Reality*, in which his philosophical aesthetics are grounded. According to his concept, this binding substance is the protagonist of a literary work. At the same time, Bakhtin consistently advances the idea that in order for it to be cast into a work of literature, prose must be aesthetically reworked by a creative individual, its author, after which it reflects an image of the consummated creative act. Within its distilled logic, abstracted from the author, it cannot locate any consummating and architectonically ordering points. According to Bakhtin, “the hero's consciousness, his feeling, and his desire of the world (his object-directed emotional and volitional attitude or posture) are enclosed on all sides, as if within a band, by the author's *consummating* consciousness of the hero and his world ...” (Bakhtin 1990 13). Roland Barthes' much later pronouncement of “the death of the author” could not, in my opinion, trump the Russian scholar's thesis. Following Bakhtin, we hold that the author is “a unique active forming energy”.

Author-protagonist relations are multifaceted, not always straightforward, and as a rule have to do with not only so-called “grammatical” (Barthes) aspects, but also with imaginative, cognitive, and ethical ones. It is frequently by means of his protagonist that the author tries to resolve many vital moral, historical, and philosophical questions. Sometimes the author rejects an objective, “outside position”,<sup>1</sup> and his stance approxi-

mates that of the protagonist to such an extent that the border between them is obliterated. The two become barely distinguishable as, for example, in works with an autobiographical orientation, where the author and protagonist not only share thoughts and feelings but a biography as well. Nonetheless, the protagonist's *I* can never become the author's *I*, since a dose of fantasy and the taste of creativity are always present.<sup>2</sup>

It stands to reason that the factor of "the author's volition" is integrally connected with the act of creating a literary work. The artistic image always depends on its creator's subject. In each literary work the author addresses many vital personal or societal moral, historical, philosophical, and other questions. Even "pure" verbal recordings of private feelings, emotions, and sentiments suppose the possibility of repeat or secondary actualization in its original imaginative unity, in the author's or another's perception, after some time has passed. The possibility remains that a written text's aesthetic existence is fundamentally determined by its internal imaginative unity as defined by the author. This unity appears even when, for example, the author compiles separate stories, plots, and images in one cycle, causing the reader to apprehend them as an imaginative-aesthetic unity. In this sense, the modern novel, having moved beyond genre borders and conventions, has a very wide array of "grammatical" and other formal possibilities, but at the same time the author and his concept remain the organizing source of thoughts and images.

In the last third of the twentieth century, the novel remains one of the most popular genres in Slovenia. Many factors, both internal and external, have contributed to its robust and successful development in these years.

Given its integration into the European context, Slovenian literature has never been a closed system. Because of this, the novel rapidly absorbs the latest literary innovations from without. At the same time, it carries on its proper artistic experiments.

The confident, steady development of Slovenian society in this period, punctuated by crucial, determining events, gave writers opportunities to reflect and ponder reality. Even the fateful years of 1990 and 1991, when the Slovenian people demonstrated an enviable unity of aspiration, can be described as a natural transition to a new level of development. Writers garnered great merit as they gradually dispensed with prohibitions and stereotypes, overcame political and ideological taboos, restored historical justice, and bore the burden of preserving national identity. The Slovenian novel served a national constitutive function and lived and breathed anticipation of change. It was in the novel that the society approached its chief goal, independence of the country, which took place in the early 1990s.

Given its polyphonic form, the contemporary novel possesses a wide variety of tools for studying the phenomenon of man, constantly adding new techniques to its own arsenal and developing ever more refined strategies. The reader is invited into a research laboratory, where he can witness and assist in the author's (and life's) experiments on humans.

Contemporary novelists are for all intents and purposes unfettered by genre conventions. A wide variety means, even those once considered incompatible, are employed on all levels of artistic canvases. The Slovenian novel provides clear confirmation of this. Fiction and documentary (e.g., Drago Jančar, *Northern Lights*, 1984), popular and elite (e.g., Dimitrij Rupel, *The Lion's Share*, 1989), prose and poetry (e.g., Jože Snoj, *Gavžen Hrib, or a Novel about a War Childhood*, 1982), tradition and experiment conjoin and interact in it. Thus, for example, Andrej Blatnik planned the anti-utopian novel with an adventure story, *Torches and Tears* (1987, reprint 2004), primarily as an experiment and constructed it on a postmodernistic novelistic model.

However, the Slovenian novel of the last third of the twentieth century no longer conducts experiments for their own sake, but displays the author's desire to grasp reality, often that of his or her own life.

As is likely the case in other contemporary literatures, so-called hybrids proliferate in the contemporary Slovenian novel, combining and toying with the features of various genres. Practically no "pure" examples of the novelist genre survive. This situation demonstrates the writer's complete freedom in choosing forms and techniques, as well as the maturity of the receiver, the reader, who has outgrown the need for genre "conventions", and, rather, is interested in new, unusual combinations that give additional food for thought and, of course, for the heart.

Thus, through private stories, personal problems, and intimate challenges, the contemporary novel facilitates understanding of the society and culture's general development and the foundation of a new state in the course of democratic changes from the late 1980s to early 1990s.

Slovenian novelists' constant attention to the inner world has spurred a flowering of the so-called autobiographical novel in precisely this period.<sup>3</sup>

The autobiographical novels of such writers as Lojze Kovačič, Vitomil Zupan, Marjan Rožanc and others have already become classics. From the writers of the middle generation in this period Franjo Frančič and Andrej Morovič deserve to be mentioned.

If we specifically consider the role of the author in Slovenian autobiographical novels, we can distinguish the following types (Sozina 2002).

First, there are novels in which the image of the author plays an especially important role as the organizing principle, acting like the images of

other characters in a work. In such novels the author purposely reveals his presence, his will, and knowledge. For him the human life at any stage of development is inexhaustibly rich; therefore, he, together with his protagonist, are scrupulous researchers of what transpires within themselves and in the world. The author's emotional-volitional reactions, setting a general rhythm<sup>4</sup> for the entire novel, are frequently reinforced with an effective rationale that relies on literary citations, examples from history, philosophers' meditations, and various digressions that fill out the image of the protagonist. A striking example of this is Vitomil Zupan's trilogy (*Minuet for a 25-String Guitar*, 1975; *Leviathan*, 1982; *The Comedy of a Human Texture*, 1980).

Different kinds of author-protagonist relations play out in those novels where the writer disappears behind a narrator or the image of a protagonist-storyteller, as happens, for example, in Marjan Rožanc's autobiographical novels (*Butterfly*, 1981; *Sentimental Story Times*, 1985). Autobiography in these cases serves only as a basis. The openness of feelings and depth of the introspection further emphasize the author's desire not to analyze his or her own development as a person and writer, but to explore society from an active civic perspective.

The protagonist in Andrej Morovič's (b. 1960) autobiographical novel *Bomba la petrolija* (1989) also rebels against the prevailing value system, trying to find himself and his place in the underground. The story about the protagonist's wanderings is full of irony and even sarcasm about his relation to reality and his life (drugs, conflicts with state authorities, adventures, etc.). Like a battery, he stores visual and sound signals within and then simply transfers them to the reader, who must arrange them himself.

The prominent Russian literary scholar L. Ia. Ginzburg suggests in *The Literary Character (O literaturnom geroe, Leningrad, 1979)* that increased interest in the documentary (and hence, high points of the autobiographical genre) usually occurs in "times of open borders".<sup>5</sup> The Slovenian novel confirms this. Authors who previously did not write in the genre turn to it then. Thus, in 1999, following *Gavžen hrib*, in which the autobiographical component is very strong, although the mythopoetic source predominates, and in other works that are hardly autobiographical, Jože Snoj finished the novel *Mr. Pepi, or an Early Search for a Name* (2000). In it, Snoj preserves the manner of his individual poetic vision while continuing in the best creative tradition of the Slovenian classic of autobiography, Lojze Kovačič. Kovačič's works are characterized by the absence of fiction as such. With few exceptions, life itself is the material of artistic creation. The creative writer's credo could well be defined as "Don't invent anything,

there is nothing more rich, varied, and interesting than life itself'. This is true of Kovačič's novels, where form is subordinate to the principle of fidelity to the truth of life (i.e., the trilogy *Newcomers*, 1984–85, or the novel *Childish Things*, 2003), as well as for works that are real formal experiments of a modernist kind (i.e., *Five Fragments*, of which only the first two were published, 1981).

Kovačič has shown in his works that pure autobiography, simple description of one's own life, may turn from a para-literary genre into a high quality piece of literature, while still preserving its value as historical witnessing. The description of what the author has actually seen and heard, conveyed with a genuine gift for exact and concise witnessing to facts, is aesthetically enhanced.

A special type of author-protagonist relation is observable in Kovačič's autobiographical novels.<sup>6</sup> Its distinctive feature is that despite the author's desire to look at himself through the protagonist's eyes, from a position exterior to that of his own as creator (as Rožanc does, for example), he invariably returns to within his protagonist, as into himself. He cannot locate relatively stable ground outside of his protagonist, and so he continues to evaluate events in the protagonist's life from within the protagonist. Even when using neutral, third person narration, as in the novels *Reality* and *Five Fragments*, for instance, the writer is unable to distance himself from the protagonist's inner *I*. In these novels, the author's role as the psychological center consolidating various phenomena of reality into a whole of himself, is apparent.

At the heart of the novel *Reality*'s plot are actual events from the writer's life. He spent six months in a penal battalion while serving in the army. Kovačič does not directly declare the identity of his own destiny and his protagonist's, as he does it in other novels. At the same time, he does not wish outwardly or inwardly to remove himself from the protagonist.

All events in the novel, characterizations of other personages, descriptions of settings, and so forth are conveyed through the protagonist's individual, subjective perception, and in no wise impartially. All information is imparted strictly within the spatio-temporal context of the protagonist's life.

The faceless narrator continually emphasizes that the protagonist "didn't trust for a second in the existence [...] of a reality from beginning to end". Probably for this reason this objective reality is left undeveloped in the novel. The concept of the image of a protagonist is a purely subjective perception of the world, frequently erroneous, but real to an individual person.

Through the course of the novel's events, the main theme is human fear and freedom, which are concretized in more private themes: relations between soldiers, army regulations, societal changes connected with historical events and cataclysms, and interethnic relations. At the same time, there is no special intention to develop these themes in some objective fashion, though there is a generalizing claim. Certain remarks and reasoning on common themes are nonetheless delivered through the protagonist's context, and it is here that the all-encompassing author, whose creative energy is essential for the completion of the protagonist's image, reveals himself. The author also shows himself ironically, from mild teasing to bilious sarcasm.

Author-protagonist relations in which the former does not strive to detach himself from his hero, whose internal perspective supplies the entire artistic space, are not unique. They are apparent, for example, in the autobiographical novel *Motherland, Pale Mother* (1986), by Franjo Frančič, a writer of another generation (b. 1958).

Lojze Kovačič and Franjo Frančič share a fidelity to the autobiographical genre and a difficult lot at the beginnings of their lives. We might posit that such author-protagonist relations at least in part due to certain psychological traumas that the writer wishes to overcome through his creative work.

The special sensitivity to surrounding reality, the search for and awareness of self and mission in the world, and escape from routine that characterize the contemporary Slovenian novel presuppose a particular mental state, a propensity to inner tensions. It should be noted that psychological interests are traditional for the Slovenian novel. However, with the development of modern science, in particular psychoanalysis, with the increasing influence of Eastern philosophies and doctrines, and the growth in the general awareness of such matters – not only on the part of writers but also of readers – the traditional psychological component of the Slovenian novel has risen to a new level.<sup>7</sup>

The author's mission as a psychological unity is important in non-realistic novels as well; for example, Jože Snoj's *Gavžen Hrib* (1982) or the anti-utopian diptych by Berta Bojetu. In her novels *Filio Isn't Home* (1990) and *The Bird's House* (1995), the writer describes two systems of aggressive patriarchal society that are isolated from the external world and tries to discredit this society, in which the person is humiliated and deprived of civil rights. In the first novel, there is an island; in the second one, it is a forgotten place in mountains. The author does not appear on the novels and does not conspicuously influence the (first-, second-, and third-person forms of) narration, which consists of heterogeneous and separate parts.

However, besides the plot and protagonists, a certain force is present, binding all these separate elements in an indivisible, psycho-emotional whole. The female protagonists in the novels are hardly capable of revolting against the existing order. But the diptych itself becomes such a revolt. Suffering and humiliation and the heartlessness of others become serious tests for those seeking fidelity and pure relations and patiently awaiting the end of their torments. Through their destinies the author tries to prove to the reader that love conquers fear, that spirituality is more valuable than surface beauty, that power and knowledge continue to contend as the two forces capable of changing the world.

Another manifestation of the author, that of an intellectual whole, is most prominent in works of a postmodernist stripe. Clear examples are the novels *Torches and Tears*, by Andrej Blatnik (1987) and *The Lion's Share*, by Dimitrij Rupel (1989). The poetics of the novels are based on their multiple levels (palimpsests), irony, gaming with literary material before the reader's eyes, the principle of the "already seen and heard" freedom of making all sorts of connections, leveling of utterances, and intertextuality. The most varied parts of the pan-European cultural context are used: some are cornerstones of the civilization; others are simple stereotypes, both positive and negative. The authors also wield fleetingly significant ideas and utterances that are relevant to a given moment. For this reason, when Blatnik's novel was reprinted in 2005, he disposed of some associations and allusions whose meanings had been lost. At the same time, in addition to the intellectual, these writers try to appeal to contemporary readers' spiritual treasuries.

In the Drago Jančar's novel *Head Noise* (1998), the witnessing of a survivor of the Livada prison uprising and the silence of ancient stones merge in a unified narration by the author's volition. The prison revolt is compared to the Masada siege of over two thousand years ago, which ended in mass suicide. The theme of the crime, a revolt against injustice, and the punishment emphasizes the moral aspect. The prison's "self-government" degenerates into the tyranny of a new power, which drowns in its own baseness, cruelty, and license; characters' feelings and acts are frequently compared to those of animals. But these same people have other potentials as well. The author has little interest in the observance or necessity of external norms of the human behavior, as established by the standard moral codes. The object of his attention is inner power, will power, the power of belief, and aspirations for justice, including on the part of the criminal protagonist, Keber.

Individualized structures prevail in the Slovenian novel of the last third of the twentieth century. At the same time, the problem of the literary



*I* is inextricably linked with the development of the general concept of self in public consciousness. The reader, and by extension the public, is presented with moral questions in literary works. By means of authors' images in various Slovenian novels, in their embedded psychological, intellectual, and moral principle, it is possible to uncover reflections of a novelist's mentality as he plays the role of spokesman for national aspirations, of indicator of the condition of contemporary society and culture. Threads of analogies, correspondences, contrasts, and similarities extend from literary works in all directions, into the depths of the literary past and across the breadth of contemporary life. The period a time for the Slovenian novel effectively to overcome all kinds of taboos, ideological and aesthetic, but it certainly did not witness the author's death. Instead, after a lengthy era of limitations and struggles with external hindrances, this period has brought to Slovenian writers a sense of total freedom and enjoyment of creative flight.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin introduced this term in his work "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" (Bakhtin 1990 15). See also Bakhtin 2000 41.

<sup>2</sup> It is remarkable that Bakhtin did not see a basic difference between biography and autobiography.

<sup>3</sup> This notion is variously understood. Different scholars have frequently instilled it with contradictory senses: For some, a simple congruence of the author's name and the name of the main character is enough, even with some fantasy; for others, it is necessary that narrated events actually took place in the author's life. The question of what is considered an autobiographical work requires thorough study, and such are already under way; for example, there was an international conference on "Slovenian autobiography" in April 2009 at the Institute of the Slovenian Literature and Literary Sciences, Scientific Research Centre of Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

<sup>4</sup> The governing rhythm is a unified tone that infuses all utterances, drawing all of them to, as it were, a single emotional and volitional denominator.

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the modern annihilation of aesthetic boundaries is reflected in discussions about the crisis (the death) of the author.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to the above-mentioned, also *Deček in smrt* (Boy and Death) (1968), *Resničnost* (Effectiveness) (1972), *Basel* (1989), *Kristalni čas* (Crystal Time) (1990), and other autobiographical works.

<sup>7</sup> It, of course, remains not everywhere, but even in many so-called mass or, perhaps better put, "cash" opuses.

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